The proposed symposium offers three engagements by philosophers of education with Ernesto Laclau’s rhetorical ontology. The symposium analyses educational theories and policies in light of Ernesto Laclau’s ontological understanding of discourse and rhetorics (2005, 2014). The focus of analysis for this symposium’s papers will be on the construction of social objectivities as it relates to the conference themes of policy borrowing and transfer and changing identities.

Having Laclau’s discourse theory (2001, 2005, 2014) as our common starting point, this symposium offers consideration of the tropological dimensions of policy and identity as they relate to the role of education in the being and becoming of the social. Treating education theories and policies as discourse means that we take into account not only those elements which respond to the normative requirements of theory building and constructing rational problem-solving strategies, but also the inconsistencies and ambiguities built on the figurative use of language. In this respect the symposium sees as constitutive what educational theories are sometimes criticised for, that is their lack of conceptual clarity, frequent normative claims, and use of figurative language (which is thought to contribute to their relatively low academic status). This symposium takes up the ontological work of normative and figurative language to highlight what educational thinking “does” to social realities and understands these oft-derided features of education discourse to be a primary terrain of social ontology.

Turning structural functionalism on its head, our analyses aim at the ontological dimensions of theories and policies which constitute particular elements of the social understood as parts of its discursive structure. Rather than arguing that people are in their whole complexity “made rhetorically” by pedagogical theories, we instead take up “peoples” as structures of relations and signification that link concrete human beings into social/political entities. Through normative and figurative articulations of such ‘peoples,’ policies and theories of education, we argue, are constitutive of the social itself.

**Paper Titles and Abstracts:**

**The Ontological Turn in Education Policy Studies: Ontological Politics and Policy Ontology**

**F. Tony Carusi, Massey University**

This paper focuses on the recent turn to ontology within education policy studies, a turn that echoes a renewed consideration of Stephen Ball’s question ‘what is policy?’ (2015). With a specifically ontological emphasis, we might reframe Ball’s question as ‘what is the is of policy?’ The scope of this paper will deal primarily with two approaches to ontology in the context of policy and education.

The first approach relies primarily on Annemarie Mol’s (1999) work on ontological politics. This approach is the main representative of the ontological turn in education policy studies (Ball,
Maguire, & Braun, 2012; Riveros & Viczko, 2015; Singh, Heimans, & Glasswell, 2014) and is characterized by its emphasis on the performance and enactment of realities, such as education policies, in contradistinction from and critical of realities that are given.

A second approach comes from Laclau’s notion of rhetorical ontology (2005, 2014). Highlighting rhetorical ontology in policy, this paper considers what makes performances and enactments of policy, for example, make sense in the first place. Through policy ontology, Laclau’s work offers a different scope for ontology in education policy studies, one that maintains alongside ontological politics the lack of realities’ givenness, but further acknowledges the ‘is of policy’ through which policy articulates realities in their being and becoming.

Identity in Politics and Education: Ontological Rhetorics

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The first aim of the paper is to discuss the role of tropes which are constitutive of Laclau’s model of the construction of political identity (i.e. metonymies, metaphors, catachreses, synecdoches, empty signifiers) in educational theories. Their scattered, although strategic presence leads to the following questions of: (1) similarities and differences between the political and the pedagogical construction of identities, (2) the ways these discursive fields are rhetorically interconnected, and (3) modifications in Laclau’s model which may fine-tune it to the specificity of educational analyses.

The assumption that Laclau’s theory might need ‘pedagogical fine-tuning’ and supplementation by other rhetorical conceptions stems from the observation that the construction of identities in education, contrary to that in populist movements analysed by Laclau, is not only spontaneous, but contains elements of purposeful organisation as well. This element points to the need of reviewing the question of the alleged ‘normative deficit’ in Laclau’s theory posed by Simon Critchley (2004), and suggests that the often derided aspects of educational theory and practice (e.g. the lack of conceptual clarity, repetitiveness, pathetic verbalism, etc.) may operate as ontological rhetorics that produce the repositories of empty signifiers applicable in the construction of political identities.

Building resistance to the GERM: Hegemonic struggles over the meaning of education in New Zealand

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This paper applies Laclau’s (1990; 1996; 2005) social ontology to understand and articulate struggles over the meaning of education in New Zealand (NZ), in the context of 25 years of the ‘neoliberalization’ (Peck, 2010) of the school sector. ‘Neoliberalization’ is understood here as an uneven process rather than as a linear trajectory, which is constantly disrupted by its own contradictory logics, by localized contextual factors, and by counter-hegemonic articulations. This process has received renewed agency since the National party came to power in 2008, whereby a discourse of ‘standards’ has been evoked that aims to close off the purposes of education to a narrowed instrumentalist accountability (Ball, 2013; Taubman, 2009; Thrupp & Wilmott, 2003).

In resistance to this neoliberalization, this paper considers interview data from NZ that draw on the holistic tradition of child-centred learning in order to disrupt the narrowing neoliberalized logic of GERM and that take advantage of the politicization of education and work to colonize key signifiers
which have been able to ‘float’ due to the impossibility of a closed discourse with no relation to externalities (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). The empty signifier of ‘GERM’ (Sahlberg, 2011) enables the counter-hegemonic actors to both retroactively name their enemy (the Global Education Reform Movement) and unite their own demands (Laclau, 2005) under the banner of the defence of public education in NZ.
Bibliography


